

## Why Trump's victims' rights plan drew boos during Tuesday night's speech

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President Donald Trump's proposal to establish an office for victims of immigrant crime may be the most controversial proposal of his controversy-ridden treatment of immigration.

The goal is to provide support to victims of crimes perpetrated by people who are in the country illegally. But that seemingly benign purpose drew the only audible protests during Trump's speech Tuesday night before Congress, and the plan to establish the office, say critics, is intended to demonize immigrants by painting them as predators bent on victimizing Americans.

"That is fear mongering," said Marielena Hincapié, executive director of the National Immigration Law Center. "That focus on perhaps a very tiny percentage of people who have committed a crime is not representative of immigrants and refugees."

Despite evidence that says otherwise, the criminal threat posed by those living in the country illegally has been a central theme for Trump since he started campaigning.

He focused again on the topic during his roughly hourlong prime-time address Tuesday, including dedicating several minutes to the plan for the new office and calling out several invited guests, one by one, who were alleged victims of immigrant crimes.

"I have ordered the Department of Homeland Security to create an office to serve American victims," Trump said Tuesday night. "We are providing a voice to those who have been ignored by our media, and silenced by special interests."

The Trump administration first announced the new office, to be known as the Victims Of Immigration Crime Engagement office, or VOICE, in January when the president signed an executive order on how immigration laws are to be enforced in the United States.

Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly again cited the new office when he signed implementation guidelines in February.

Kelly said the office would be under the director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and would serve as a liaison between ICE and victims of crimes committed by removable immigrants. The office will provide information on the offenders and their immigration status, as well as other data. It's to be paid for, Kelly wrote, by repurposing funds that go to provide legal representation to foreigners facing deportation.

“Criminal aliens routinely victimize Americans and other legal residents,” Kelly wrote in the Feb. 20 guidelines.

Immigration advocates say that Kelly statement is at best an exaggeration and that studies over the years have concluded that immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than people born in the United States. Experts say the available evidence does not support the idea that immigrants commit an increased share of crime.

Trump has repeatedly featured family members who he said were killed by immigrants who were in the country illegally. But the details of those cases don't support Trump's image of marauding foreigners victimizing Americans. Several of the cases involve traffic accidents, and in one instance a woman was killed by her ex-boyfriend. One person Trump highlighted during his campaign died of cancer 12 years after being shot. The person who shot him was a legal Vietnamese immigrant who later hanged himself in his cell.

Immigration and crime have had an inverse relationship over the years, according to the American Immigration Council.

Since the 1990s, immigration has risen but crime rates have dropped. The number of immigrants in the country illegally has more than tripled, from 3.5 million to 11.2 million. Meanwhile, violent crime – including aggravated assault, robbery, rape and murder – has dropped 48 percent.

David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, said there was nothing wrong with the idea of providing more information to victims of crimes but that such information should be provided to all victims, not just those victimized by immigrants.

“Clearly the fact that he's only focused on victims of immigrant crimes is a sign that illegal immigrants are committing a disproportionate number of crimes,” Bier said. “There is no evidence whatsoever for that, and all the evidence points the other direction. What we really need to do is focus on victims of crime regardless of who commits the crime.”